

WORKSHOP REPORTS

1. VIOLS AT FORT BELAN

“He’s behind you!” If only someone had given William Lawes such a shout on that day in September 1654 at the siege of Chester, we may have had much more of the wonderful music, unpublished in his lifetime but left behind for viol players to enjoy today. Sadly, Royalist William, thinking the battle won, failed to notice that the Parliamentarians had regrouped and were sneaking up round the back. His untimely death at the age of only 43 deprived us of more of his wonderful idiosyncratic, bold and adventurous music, described by the contemporary antiquarian and amateur musician, Anthony Wood as music which “sometimes broke ye rules of mathematicall composition”.

What gave rise to this rather odd thought? Well, on a Friday afternoon in April I found myself driving via Chester down to the ever so slightly surreal surroundings of Fort Belan, an 18th century fortification at the edge of Snowdonia on the Gwynedd coast at the SW end of the Menai Strait, to take part in a weekend organised by Clive Tolley, Ann Clements and Ron Kelley, studying and playing some of the music of Lawes and Brade under the tutelage of Ibi Aziz and Hugh Cherry. The fort, (yes, a real fort), now a Grade 1 listed building, was built in 1775 by the local MP, who, fearing a reprisal attack by American patriots during the War of Independence, paid for the construction of a mini-fort, complete with moat, drawbridge and cannon; a small dock was added in 1826 which was later used as a sailing club for the nearby Caernarfon. Reached by a track which would easily serve as a tank trap for a modern invading army, today it is owned and run as self-catering accommodation by Chris Blundell whose family has carried out much restoration and who, being a viol player himself, was delighted to play host to eighteen or so others. Apart from the attraction of the place itself, locating the weekend in a more central location seemed to encourage players from all parts of the UK as well as Eire and the Isle of Man to attend.

Accommodation in the Fort is divided into four "houses" each with its own facilities and this allowed four playing groups of different combinations for each of four sessions throughout the day. Ibi and Hugh divided their time between each of the groups, the remainder of the time being self-tutored. Each playing combination was carefully constructed by Ibi, with the skilful spatial use of name badges on a notice board, however not everyone caught onto this method of indicating who was playing which part with some consequent unexpected configurations. Despite the music being made available beforehand, (and therefore the opportunity to practise the tricky bits), the perennial problem of coping with a range of playing abilities and viols played meant that, for some, the chance to play and explore as much of Lawes' music, as promised was restricted somewhat and although not a huge problem, the absence of a definitive programme other than for the Lawes and Brade, did lead to some wasted time sorting out suitable music to play. For those all - important mealtimes, Pat Tolley demonstrated a truly amazing ability to produce a wonderful three-course dinner for us all on the first evening, (aided by contributions from some of the participants), and lunch on the

subsequent two days virtually single-handed; some help in the preparation was provided by a couple of volunteers leaving their groups to lend a hand, but of course, this meant that the respective group was then depleted for the final 20 minutes or so of each pre-lunch session. I'm sure that the organisers will have learned much from the initial experience of holding a viol course in such and fabulous and unusual venue, and I understand that a repeat weekend is being planned for next year. Now if they could just guarantee the same sunshine, blue skies and magnificent sunsets.....

Thelma Williams